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A diploma's worth...

High school grads face few opportunities

Selicia Kennedy-Ross, Staff Writer

For San Bernardino kids fresh out of high school, the search for a good, well-paying job can be rock strewn.

Angelica Hernandez learned that four years plus one diploma do not equal an instant job.

San Bernardino residents like Hernandez, who aren't college-bound, are finding it increasingly difficult to land a decent-paying job after high school.

Many community groups and educational agencies push students to stay in school and graduate but few address how to help them after graduation.

Educators say pressure from state and federal accountability measures have forced California school districts to eliminate elective vocational classes in favor of remedial classes.

Vocational education has become undervalued in California's learning system, which is geared toward college-bound students, even though they are in the minority, they say.

Career and vocational education are a top priority elsewhere, however.

Behind the story

online **EXTRA**

- [Report](#): Improving High Schools from the California Legislative Analysts Office
972KB file in .pdf format;
76 pages
- [Web site](#): San Bernardino County Workforce Investment Network

In Las Vegas, Vo-Tech High School is one of three career and technical high schools that provide a variety of vocational training for students such as culinary arts, construction and nursing.

Schools in the Clovis Unified and Fresno Unified school districts are eligible to attend a career and technical school, known as CART, which also specializes in vocational training.

As more students drop out of school, finding good jobs in an area where well-paying positions are hard to come by becomes even more difficult.

Those with a diploma, but without college educations, don't fare much better.

Unable to find the skills they need in the local work force, employers are going outside the area in a search to hire for specialized jobs.

Entry-level jobs in the retail, service and logistics industries are available in the area but most have little-to-no future.

Unskilled and underpaid

The result is an unskilled, underpaid work force and a growing problem of poverty and crime in a generation unable to support itself.

San Bernardino is grappling with a lengthening spate of violent crime that includes the Nov. 13 gang-related shooting death of 11-year-old Mynesha Crenshaw. The child was fatally wounded as she sat down to dinner with her family in a poverty plagued neighborhood. Police say the bullet that killed her was fired by a gang member bent on retribution. She was an innocent and unintended victim.

Mynesha's death has left a mournful community searching for solutions to the violence and the poverty afflicting some San Bernardino neighborhoods.

Some educators question why the state's academic standards are based on courses needed for admission to the University of California and its branches or California State University campuses, especially when so few students are college-bound.

Ultimately, only 15 percent of the statewide student population will earn a degree from a four-year state university, said Seth Bates, a professor at San Jose State University.

Such a strong emphasis is being placed on standardized tests like the California High School Exit Exam, which high school seniors must pass to graduate, that vocational education takes a backseat.

The standards-based

curriculum is so demanding that "whether they are planning to go to college or not,



students don't have room to take any career preparation courses," he said.

"We've lost at least 80 percent of our high school vocational training in the last 30 years," Bates said. "Since 70 to 75 percent of students will go directly into the workplace after high school, you wonder how they are going to be prepared for that."

Roughly 48,000 high school seniors statewide are still waiting to see if they passed the exit exam and will graduate in June, including more than 400 of approximately 2,000 seniors in San Bernardino City Unified School District.

Seven out of 10 high school freshmen will graduate and fewer than four will go on to a community or four-year college, according to a 2004 report from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Drop out rate increasing

About one-third of California's high school students drop out of school because they become bored or "disengaged," said Paul Warren, policy analyst with the state's Legislative Analyst's Office.

A 2005 study by the state office also showed nearly half of high school students statewide were set to graduate but were not qualified to attend a University of California or a Cal State University branch.

The number of high school students participating in vocational education has dropped since 1997, Warren said.

"If the purpose (of state testing) is to get more kids to go to college, then that is valid," said Audrey McFarlane, an associate professor at University of Baltimore School of Law. "Otherwise, it's a short-sighted approach based on imperatives they are under if they don't get scores up, then funding for schools is jeopardized."

Unemployment could even become an unintended effect of standardized testing, she said.

Quality career and technical education options for students who are not college-bound should be available and should not be perceived as anti-college rhetoric, educators said.

"We don't want to push kids toward vocational education," said Assemblyman Joe Baca Jr., D-Rialto, a former substitute teacher who sponsored a career and technical education summit last fall. "We just want to see it as an alternative choice."

More skills needed

The basics: how to dress, how to act in an interview, where to look for a job, are all hurdles high school graduates who aren't college-bound face, especially for jobs with potential for growth.

Young job candidates are often unprepared for interviews, said Adaline Campero-Garcia, a career transitions specialist with Inland Empire Job Corps.

The major issue the city and county are struggling with is an undereducated work force and students who can't pass apprenticeship exams containing algebra and geometry, said Herb Fischer, San Bernardino County superintendent of schools.

Schools need to build a stronger academic foundation but also need to work on teaching other skills too, he said.

"We've worked on academics but not what the industry calls the soft skills, work ethics, proper attire, attendance, attitude," Fischer said. "When I've talked with employers, I've noticed them not being so concerned about the standards as much as the fact that so many students don't understand the importance of being to work on time or wearing the proper clothes."

In order to better prepare students for the job market, Fischer's office has reached out to the business, faith-based and labor community to form the Alliance for Education, a mentoring partnership intended to create a higher-skilled, more highly educated work force.

"Our business leaders bring students a sense of meaning and purpose and in several instances have led to them becoming motivated and re-engaged in their education," said Leslie Rodden, coordinator for the Alliance for Education.

One example of the way the Alliance works is through the Applications by Business and Labor for Education program, which allows professionals to show students hands-on applications for schoolwork, such as math, English and science.

During a presentation in March, San Bernardino firefighters showed San Gorgonio High School students how to use algebra to help fight fires.

Fire engineer Tom Rubio showed an Algebra I class how to use an algebraic equation to figure out how much water should be pumped through the hose, which can be critical depending on the type of fire and where it is.

Such outreach can inspire students, Rodden said.

"They really do need technical skills to find a job that pays higher than minimum wage," she said. "It used to be you could enter the unskilled jobs and they would train you; now you need technical certification."

Today, high school graduates run the risk of being left with a diploma and no job because they lack technical skills, Rodden said.

The region is booming with lower-paying service retail and logistics jobs, a trend mirrored nationwide, but those jobs pay wages that leave workers at the near poverty or poverty level, McFarlane said.

Set up to struggle

"You're setting them up to struggle economically and setting the region up because they won't be tax contributors," she said. "There can be a multiple effect."

California Steel Industries in Fontana, one of the area's largest employers, hires most of its work force of young people locally as entry-level machine operators, jobs that require a high school diploma or a GED, said Ronald Maiorano, a manager at the company.

But for specialized trades like electricians and mechanics, the company usually recruits outside the area, Maiorano said.

"The people here who respond to our ads don't have the skills we need for that type of job," he said. "They just aren't there."

Brett Guge, vice-president of administration for California Steel, said the company depends on entry-level workers with basic problem-solving, writing and math skills.

"But from a quality and safety standpoint when you get into these higher level technical positions those are skills you can't just learn in high school or even a two-year program," Guge said.

Business leaders have suggested that educational standards need to be closer to industry standards. The educational system

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does not match what skills are needed in the workplace, employers said.

In the past, most companies honed employees' skills through apprenticeship programs until the practice became too costly, Guge said.

But a partnership between two community colleges, a handful of local businesses including California Steel Industries and Tamco Steel and the San Bernardino County Work force Investment Board could change that.

Starting in May and June, the companies are launching training programs at the colleges for 48 of their existing employees to learn specialized jobs.

Community college partners

The partnership has established a mechanical training program at San Bernardino Valley College and an electrical

program at Chaffey Community College in Rancho Cucamonga.

The idea is to upgrade the skills of existing workers so they can be promoted within their own companies.

The next step might be to develop programs where students can graduate from school, join these companies and then go right into the training programs, Guge said.

Both the county and the companies are concerned about the local labor pool, especially since the heavy manufacturing industry is having difficulty finding skilled workers statewide, said Barbara Halsey, executive director of the county's Work force Investment Board.

"Schools no longer place value on vocational classes, so many students leave high school with no exposure to the trades," Halsey said. "If they're not college-bound and the majority aren't what are their alternatives? We have more and more kids coming out of school who don't know what to do.

"There are good paying jobs, but the skilled work force we need to move into those jobs no longer exists here."

Through the partnership, the community colleges can develop an understanding of what the industry wants and tailor the classes to what's needed.

Then the kids coming out of the schools will have a competitive advantage, Halsey said.

As schools push academics only, occupational training programs like the Colton-Redlands-Yucaipa Regional Occupational Program have become more important, since they are the only places where some students like 16-year-old Danielle Garcia of Highland can turn.

Danielle is participating in a 75-hour unpaid retail internship with Bed, Bath & Beyond in Redlands. If she does well, she can apply for a job there or use her experience as a reference. She plans to attend Crafton Hills College next year.

Wanted work experience

After watching friends who entered the work force immediately after leaving high school, Garcia wanted some work experience before graduation so she wouldn't end up searching several weeks or months for a job like they did.

"I thought this would be a good opportunity," the Redlands East Valley High junior said.

However, such education and business partnerships rely on the business community to embrace the schools, which isn't happening among most automotive dealers in San Bernardino, said Steve Ford, the Southern California director of Automotive Youth Educational Systems, an automotive industry partnership that grooms high school students through job shadowing, internships and job-placement.

Only one San Bernardino dealer Center Chevrolet has shown interest in partnering with San Bernardino High School, which in the past has recruited students.

And eight dealers and 11 students have signed on at Ontario High School for the AYES program this year.

Local dealerships may be recruiting young trainees from neighboring communities or attracting them from each other, Ford said.

"In the case of the automotive service industry, I don't see any evidence of a concerted effort to reach out and embrace and help develop the young people in San Bernardino," Ford said.

"What I've observed about San Bernardino schools is that there are probably some students who have had a tough time getting a focused education because of distractions by negative influences in their neighborhoods, like crime or gangs."

Crime in the city dropped 39 percent between 1995 and 2000, mirroring a drop in crime in other cities like New York City and San Diego. Crime experts have said a robust economy, low unemployment and a smaller group of young people between ages 14 and 27 were all factors.

Crime, joblessness linked

"There is a well-documented link between crime and unemployment," said John L. Worrall, a criminal justice professor at Cal State San Bernardino. "Some studies suggest for every one percent change (up or down) in unemployment, there's a one percent change in crime. But that's too simple, there are more factors to it than that."

While the community seeks solutions to the recent violence in San Bernardino and neighboring cities, at least one of the factors that contributes to crime unemployment will grow less powerful.

In a recent interview, Redlands-based economist John Husing said San Bernardino and Riverside counties will be experiencing growth in higher-paying jobs, projecting the region will add 7,400 high-paying professional jobs this year, along with nearly 30,000 other new jobs.

But whether the county's newest graduates will be able to reap the benefits of Husing's predictions remains to be seen.

Employers should not merely expect "a finished product" in terms of a ready work force from schools unless they are willing to invest in their communities and help hone a generation of workers, Ford said.

"As employers, I simply believe we may be letting ourselves down expecting somebody else to do it," Ford said. "Every day, we see students go through automotive programs and become interested after years of not connecting with their education."

"And as talent becomes harder to find in alternative ways, we'll end up looking in our own backyards again. And that's where we need to look."

Hernandez was a nervous wreck as she waited to hear whether she had been hired as a file clerk by a San Bernardino mortgage company. She really wanted the job.

To Hernandez, the \$10-an-hour position seemed like a dream.

Hernandez admits she was sometimes frustrated during her months of hunting for a job.

"It's rough," she said. "You're not used to responsibility, then suddenly you're having to help Mom and all of a sudden bills are overdue and you're stressed!"

Public agencies that help young people land work, such as the Job Corps Center, can increase a job seeker's opportunities.

High success rate

The center has about a 95 percent success rate with job placement, generally finding its graduates employment within six months, said Adan Gomez, spokesman for Inland Empire Job Corps Center.

Still, Gomez said, there are a handful of students like Hernandez who don't end up getting hired right away.

How fast a student finds work after the program can sometimes depend on factors like where they live. Students in Bakersfield or the High Desert will have more difficulty getting jobs than those who live in the San Bernardino or Riverside areas.

Employers also tend to want to hire workers with experience, Gomez said.

Hernandez, who obtained her high school diploma from Inland Empire Job Corps Center, can hardly wait.

"I was nervous I didn't sleep all night," she said, smoothing her hair and eye shadow, her excitement visible in her shaking hands. Everything has to be just right today.

It's the first day on her new job.

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